

# SEASON OF GOOD CHEER IN TIDEWATER VIRGINIA

**Customs Change, but Real Spirit of Christmas Still Abounds in Hearts of People.**

## TABLES ARE HEAVILY LADED

**There Is Enough for All, and There Will Be Merriment on the Plantations, Among Rich and Poor, White and Colored.**

BY J. M. HELL.

The Christmas season in Tidewater has seen many changes in the last twenty years, but the real spirit of the festive occasion still is warm in the hearts of its people. White and colored have made preparation according to their circumstances. Hog killing is over, corn is gathered and wood piles are ready. There is not a home, however humble, that will not exemplify the season of "gifts and turkey." The turkey may be heating in many ovens, but there will be some extra signs of good cheer on every table, and hospitality fairly abounds.

Where the emblematic bird is absent, there will be a substitute—a fresh ham, chicken, duck, goose, beef—in fact, it may be said truthfully that the "Yuletide Season" will surely be observed, and it will be a mighty unusual case where, among any class in this favored section, there is an entire absence of a display of extra good cheer, both eating and drinking.

### Old English Customs.

The "plantes" of Tidewater Virginia followed the customs of his ancestors from the "Mother Country," and four generations to generation the representative people have kept up those customs. The Civil War, the freedom of the slaves, the moving of vast numbers of them, along with their children, to Northern cities, has not diminished that love of Christmas inherent in the very natures of those people whose forebears so cherished the season of mirth in "Merry England."

Mansion and church are decorated. Morning services are held in many an old edifice, where in the early Colonial days, subjects of the English King, served for His Majesty.

### Twenty Years Ago.

Times have changed in the past twenty years. The country stores do not now sell whiskey. The Christmas bowl of eggnog (free to all) is not seen on the counter. Now, spiritual exhilaration comes from the either, but sometimes all the same in bottles and jugs.

The large plantation owner of this sturdy inclined, has long since abandoned his supplies, if not so inclined, he furnishes to his guests a "feast of reason and flow of soul" without liquid refreshments. This may be a hardship or not according to the thirst of those who attend a "dry" banquet; but if strong drink is lacking, choice food is plentiful.

The country storekeeper still helps his thirsty customers to enjoy Christmas, for when the orders go to town, a quart of liquor is included along with the general supplies, and right here it might as well be explained that the average storekeeper will without any profit to himself see that his hundred customer is unremembered, and color blue is no drawback; so the dinner bowl on the Christmas table has no reason for elimination, so far as the prevailing "dry" laws are concerned, and many a man, "both white and colored," will take his Christmas morning "sawdust" never a mind what article of liquor it be, and smile to think that prohibition has not entirely stifled the time-honored custom of ushering in Christmas morning in "greatest house" farmstead, or "quarters" with the "cup" that cheers.

### A Christmas Story

By Louise Heitgers.

Twenty years ago wire fences were the general way of fox-hunting was in its glory. The writer recalls seventeen packs of hounds in Charles City County on a historical strip of land thirty miles long and eight wide, but containing a population that rivaled all the deer of old Christmas customs, fox-hunting included.

On Christmas Day the horns of the hunters made the wilkin ring. Girls of Reids were chased according to locality, but all the same the "neighbors' hounds" packs accounted well for themselves, ere the weary, but happy huntsmen brought back the trophys and sat down to the festive board.

Some good stories can be told about the hunting, such as the really low spider made the running, how Twelvemight took off the track when the other dogs were bated, and how John Grant, Maud, Tom, Fleet and Reckless, all striding together went to the front and caught the "old gray" at Sweeney's Creek.

Now the wire fences are breaking up this great sport, but there will be some fox hunts with local dogs. "Old Virginia" never fails.

### Good Roads.

Twenty years ago the roads throughout the Old Dominion at Christmas time were not in shape for automobile traffic, hence the town cousins made the annual trip to the old homestead by boat or rail; now they can take the car, ride forty or more miles, enjoy the Christmas dinner, exchange greetings and presents, and if necessary, be back to the city home the same night.

Nothing has brought the people together like the great improvement in the public highway system now in existence. It has brought town and country in very close juxtaposition and has encouraged visiting relatives, distant long isolated from each other, and has also made it possible for automobile owners to run the car to the old country home and see the folks at Christmas time.

Perhaps the very best money expended by the State is in the permanent improvement of the country roads. Anyway, the people who want to get to the country for Christmas think so.

### The Darkies' Christmas.

The writing of rural life in Tidewater Virginia it may just as well be understood that the white man cannot do much without the darky. Whether it be in plantation work in the fields, in the garden, around the house or what not, the dusky descendants of the former slaves are in evidence, illustrating in the most practical manner that "the white folk won't do without de nigga."

So when the Christmas season has arrived these colored dependents, whether still living on the farms or little patches bought by them, get ready for that one week of frolicking.

Imagine the scene of a darky's Christmas to date. Say it is on a big plantation and the man and his family are known and loved by the owners. What will you see before the work has stopped on Christmas Eve? First, a big pile of wood before the "quarters," hickory, oak, pine and elm. The "boss's" team used to haul it free from "de big woods." Go into the "quarters" ask the dusky wife, about her preparations for "Christmas." Here is about what you will find: "Law, boss, Gus done kill er, he weighed 'bout 200 pounds; d—n bin ter town en got er lot chilin', 'coo—er bring dat jug—dat's 1—yassir, we gwine to reddy it now. I already

## Christmastime in Tidewater Virginia



Hunting Party in Tidewater Virginia.

got my cakes en ples baked, en er nice fat hen hangin' on de neck poche."

Go out in the settlement where the former plantation slaves have bought their little patches of land and are now enjoying their home, but still dependent on the big farms. Visit a home near is a store kept by a negro, or perhaps by a white man.

It is Christmas Eve, and the shades of night are falling. All around and in the circumscribed space of the steppes are gathered.

The north wind is blowing outside. Within, the little stove, stuffed to the pipe, is furnishing heat and comfort. A wagon draws up at the "Stop signs." It has made the thirty-mile trip from Richmond. Out are handed bundles and packages, all sorts of Christmas goods. The snow is falling, the tired team looks longingly at the stable, rear, corn and top-fodder for their night meal.

On "Christmas mornin'" the surrounding negro houses will resound good cheer. All trouble, care and past debts in the background, nothing in the present, or the bright future (for a week, at least), but jollity. Plenty to eat, plenty to drink, "ole hyar" an opossum hunts, big feasts, lodge meetings—all go to round up the time between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day.

Relations from the Northern cities flock to the Virginia soil during this season. Big wages have allure them from the plantations. They serve as waiters, butlers or maids, according to sex. The Christmas season brings them in for a week. These negroes have sent many a dollar to Dixie land to help out for the lack of ground, or help build the dog or weatherboard cabin in the new ground.

The season of "Peace on earth and good will toward men" is here. The terrible and devastating war in Europe no doubt will keep on its course, but in Tidewater Virginia the spirit of the occasion of love and pleasure will follow its course as it were.

There will be family reunions, hunts, dances, exchange of presents, and fond remembrances among the "white folks." There will be a good time among the darkies, in their way, and will ring as "Merry as a marriage bell."



"Fleet," a Virginia Fox Hound.

diutian affair the box was. One of the panels was loose, and the letter, in some amazing way, had slipped behind it. It looks a bit yellow, and no wonder, considering the time it must have been there. Anne will persist the address is in her father's handwriting, but I tell her it is nonsense. I don't believe you ever met the old chap.

Miss Emmeline read no further. With trembling hands, she picked up the second letter. Two little spots flared suddenly in her cheeks as she stared back at her. She had not cried for years, but now she felt the sharp sting of tears behind her eyelids. The brass clasp of bells turned suddenly into the drowning of bees. She was walking in a garden, a spring garden, golden with daffodils and sunshines and youth, with a man young and dark as she was young and fair; a little stream ran bubbling at the end of the garden.

She spoke imperiously: "Barnes, I want this telegram sent at once. Also please tell Mrs. Yates that I am expecting my nephew and his wife at any moment, and that I wish rooms to be prepared for them immediately."

When the man had left the room again, Miss Emmeline walked across to the long French window, and smiling happily, threw it open. She was anxious now to hear the bells. All the bitterness of many years had melted from her heart, as snow melts in the sun. She could meet Walter's wife now without hate, gay with eagerness, Christmas day, for there is a time, late afternoon, when the turkey is

ashamed of her love no longer, she her own child. She drew a deep breath, a thing of joy, breath as the bitter-sweet scent of the chrysanthemums came into the room on a rush of cold air. It was a good world, after all.

The Christmas peace stole into Miss Emmeline's heart as she looked upon the whiteness of the hills. The bells still rang loudly, for it was Christmas Day, and the Christ Child watched about a happy winter world.

## OLD GAMES FOR CHRISTMAS

### What to Do Between Sundown and Duck to Amuse the Little Children.

Between the dark and the daylight, When the night is beginning to lower,

There comes in of the day's occupations

A very bad quarter of an hour.

This is not the time the postman said it, exactly, but it's the time that the boy who would have said it if he had been entertaining a household of children on Christmas day, for there is a time, late afternoon, when the turkey is

over.

And, strange though the wonderful

fact may be,

That little boy don't little wish

came true;

They picked her right off of the Christ-

mas tree,

Nancy Reed Turner in the Youth's

Companion.

to you!

—Arthur Glitterman in the Youth's

Companion.

### Seems to Me

Seems to me the stars shine brighter

Christmas night;

Seems to me the snow lies whiter

Christmas night;

That the solemn trees stand straighter,

And the frosty moon sets later;

And the bush is stiffer, greater

Christmas night.

Seems to me sad things are fewer

Christmas night;

Seems to me glad things are truer

Christmas night;

Seems to me the bells ring clearer

From the spires, louder, nearer—

Seems to me the whole world's dearer

Christmas night.

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